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NICARAGUA/CIA>JENNINGS: The very first topic during last night's debate < >MANUAL> had to do with that CIA manual for antigovernment forces in Nicaragua. It had only come to light a few days ago, and last night the president said he had no answer to where any blame lies. It is controversial, because in contravention of a presidential directive, the manual advises guerrillas on how to assassinate government officials. Today the secretary of State was busy deflecting questions on the subject and as John McWethy reports, the CIA began to explain the matter to Congress.

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MCWETHY: On Capitol Hill today, two very junior spokesmen for the CIA held a closed-door briefing for the staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee and two senators. There were many questions about where the guerrilla handbook came from, and Sen. Sam Nunn said the objectionable word 'neutralize,' broadly thought to mean assassinate, had not been edited out of the handbook as indicated by the president last night. SEN. SAM NUNN (D-Ga.): There are a number of questions, based on what I heard today, that will have to be asked. And I hope there are answers. I haven't gotten them yet.

MCWETHY: The man believed responsible for writing the guerrilla handbook is described by those who worked with him as a Korean and Vietnam war veteran who trained the CIA-backed guerrillas at their base camps in Honduras. Officials say his name is John Kirkpatrick, and although they acknowledge he was on the CIA payroll, they are now disowning him and his work. Secretary of State Shultz today, in interviews with local television stations, swept aside allegations of CIA activity in Nicaragua and minimized the importance of Kirkpatrick's work.

GEORGE SHULTZ (secretary of State): There isn't any CIA presence in Nicaragua, and I don't know about the employ of Mr. Kirkpatrick.

MCWETHY: But was he employed by the CIA? SHULTZ: Apparently he was. That's not a regular employee, but somebody paid to do a particular contract.

MCWETHY: As for those who allowed the CIA publication on assassination to be paid for by the government and

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distributed, Shultz said... SHULTZ: I feel it will be investigated and those who are responsible for it will be put to rest, so to speak.

MCWETHY: Did Shultz ever read a classified Defense Intelligence Agency document from 1982 that categorically stated the CIA-backed contras were already involved in 'the assassination of minor government officials and a Cuban adviser.' SHULTZ: The information I get, of course, comes from our intelligence briefings and from the CIA briefings, and what you're reading to me I have never read.

MCWETHY: So the issue of who knew what was going on and who eventually will be held responsible is being passed further and further down the government pecking order, with the president and his secretary of State continuing to say they knew nothing about it. John McWethy, ABC News, the State Department. <